

The Role of Mentorship as an Approach for Enhancing Employability Skills for 21st Century in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper investigated the role of mentorship in enhancing employability skills among the college graduates. As a desktop study, it relied on secondary data. After reviewing the relevant literature; the secondary data was thematically analyzed, contextualized and applied the answer to study question “What is the role of mentorship in enhancing employability skills in the 21st century?” There is a genuine concern globally to boost the employability of fresh college graduates to match the employers’ expectations in the job market. To successfully penetrate the crowded job market, the graduates have to prove their competitiveness through possessing the critical employability skills desired in their relevant sector. The paper established the following common skills that were seen as foundational by diverse employers: teamwork, problem solving, work ethic, integrity, positive attitudes and critical thinking, self-drive, emotional intelligence at the workplace, communication, and interpersonal skills. The study concluded that mentoring relationship stands out as one of the most effective developmental platform for developing and nurturing the relevant skills, competencies and character that will enhance graduates’ penetration to the job market; and consequently enhancing their employability skills needed in the 21st Century. Institutions and other relevant stakeholders in the higher education need to partner and support one another in developing pertinent skills, knowledge, and professional competencies that sustainably match the global job market. The university as the prime trainer of our workforce must chart the way forward and effectively work with all other actors in the job-market.

Key words: *Mentorship, employability skills, workplace, human resource*

Introduction

Recently the numbers of universities and graduates have increased worldwide thus indicating the importance of higher education. As Clawson (2011) and Nason (2011) state, university education is becoming more important than ever and critical for individuals’ and nations’ development. Despite the remarkable growth in higher education, the number of the unemployed graduates is worrisome especially to the policymakers (Flexman & Gelb, 2011). Although some job opportunities are still open, Griffin and Reddick (2011) noted the lack of job skills among the current graduates. ACCI (2007) concurs that improving the fresh graduates’ employability skills is already one the topmost agendas worldwide. Further, Nason (2013, p.9) states that the university and other relevant stakeholders

need to respond to the employability skills need-gap. Yesterday's 'tricks' cannot work effectively today; that means without new interventions most of the graduates may remain jobless. As Rychen and Salganik (2001) observe, there are no easy ways to overcome the mystery of graduates' unemployment other than enhancing their employability skills. Core stakeholders like the employer, university and the community of professionals need to come up with relevant interventions to make the graduates more competitive.

What is Mentoring?

Lottero-Perdue and Fifield (2010) observe that there exists no consensus as of now what mentoring means; there are diverse definitions. Thus the possibility to agree on a single universal definition is not visible in the near future. According to the Employer Mentoring Handbook (2016, p.9); mentoring is the one to one long-term relationship between an experienced, skilled and wise professional (mentor); and a student (mentee). Mentoring programme therefore is important as a long-term intervention to enhance the capacity of the mentee in developing knowledge, skills and relevant personal qualities that are valued by the 21st Century employer. Put together, Curtin University (2011) and Burnham, Schiro, & Fleming (2011) both agree that mentoring has emerged as one of the best approaches to enhance the acquisition and development of the highly demanded employability skills in an ever dynamic, changing world of technological and diverse practices. The university has not fully integrated employability skills into its curriculum this far (Bronte-Tinkew, Allan & Joyner, 2007; and Lottero-Perdue & Fifield, 2010). The interaction with the experienced mentors on one-to-one basis is critical in enhancing their employability skills. Such skills are not only indicators of students' readiness for market entry; they also are necessary for the students' realization of their dream career (Toress & Hermazade, 2010).

Basic Employment Skills Required by Employers

As Nason (2016) observes, some of the common foundational skills often cited by a consortium of employers include teamwork, problem solving, work ethics, integrity, problem solving, positive attitudes and critical thinking. For sustainable development of the employability skills, all the critical stakeholders need to proactively work together so as to respond holistically to the entire issue of matching the relevant skills and job market in order to enhance graduates' employability. Coates (2012) posits that it is easy for the mentors and mentees to develop a programme that is relevant and effective to achieve their objectives. The mentee can develop objectives and goals that rotate around the desired and relevant skills. Thus, with a clear strategic planning, the university can effectively influence directly the development of the needed competencies (Sorcinielli & Yun, 2009).

The Process of Carrying out Employer Mentoring

The institution carrying out employer mentoring should begin by stating the overall purpose of the mentoring programme, and the goals to be achieved (Nason, 2016; Carruthers, 1993). Enough information should be given to all the members of the organization to enhance their motivation, preparedness, and effective

participation. The final major step is to train the mentors; everything will revolve around the suitability of the effective and qualified mentors (Castell, 2011). The commitment of training and empowering mentors should be taken with all due seriousness; in reality there should be no limitation in investing in the development of the mentors (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2009). The number of the mentors to be trained should be balanced with the number of the potential mentees.

Carruthers (1993) observes that there is no shortcut in developing employability skills; the mentee must remain actively connected to the mentor, and the university community life and culture (Ragins & Kram, 2006). Through the informal interactions, the mentee identifies latent skills in him/her which are then developed to the full potential. The clubs and societies offer an excellent platform to address one's weakness and thus become a better person through the support of the other members. Unfortunately, some students tend to see societies and clubs as wastage of time; with such a negative attitude, the goldmine of unfathomable social resources goes unearthed by the students who are core beneficiaries of such clubs (Nason, 2016). Other peer interactions like debates and university's politicking help the mentee learn to be assertive. Thus the mentee is able to track his/her development of the desired skills (Castell, 2011).

Keeping of a Personal Journal

Coates (2012) strongly advises that the mentee should keep a personal journal where he/she records lessons learned, skills demonstrated during his/her social interactions. The purpose of the journal is to help the mentee to keep track of their skills and experiences. At the end of the day the mentee makes the due entries to his personal journal everything is fresh in his mind. Nason (2016) suggests that the journal should have three columns:

1. Lessons learnt about self during interactions in the day
2. Employability skills and values exhibited by the mentee himself
3. Negative reactions that call for improvement

A neatly kept journal is very helpful when the mentee is preparing summaries for his/ her curriculum vitae, and when reflecting on their development of the employability skills the mentee can make informed opinions about self-development by quickly referring to the journal entries (Allen, 2006).

Basic Roles of the University in Developing the Employability Skills

The role of the university in developing and training the country's human capital remains critical; thus the university makes enormous contributions to socioeconomic, cultural, and political development of the workforce (Nason, 2011). Against this background, the university needs to be more proactive in carrying out timely curriculum mapping with an aim of identifying the employability skills-gaps, and then develop a well rounded curriculum in response. While developing or reviewing the university's curriculum; the university should

link with the other relevant actors and stakeholders. Such partnership and consultation leads to improved production and development of relevant employability skills. Stakeholders' linkage can be done by carrying out surveys, joint consultative forums, having focus groups with the other players in the field (Toress & Hermazade, 2010).

Burnham, Schiro and Fleming (2011), note that university's practice of placing students in field attachment is one of the most important opportunities the students (mentees) have to acquire employability skills. The students are given a golden opportunity to engage the organizations directly and get to know the organizations' goals and expectations. Nason (2016) confirms that such exposure is important because it will assist the student in sharpening, and repackaging their employability skills practically. Castell (2011) confirms the same; during student's placement, he/ she understands fully the dynamics of the workplace and the skills that are needed therein. For future employment the individual is able to take up his new job with the required precision, and knowledge (Fieldman, et al., 2012).

Discussion on the Employability Skills

The Employer Mentoring Handbook (2016, p.9), discusses in depth the employability competencies and skills. After a critical literature which also included analysis of empirical studies; there were between seven and eight employability skills which were widely mentioned. The skills are therefore tabulated below in the order of they were presented (Castell, 2011).

Communication Skills. Communication skills have been defined as the ability to share information with others effectively and efficiently (Chong, 2009). Indeed, a person possessing communication skills, he must be a good listener. Without listening one cannot understand the issue being floated and its context. Therefore, listening enables one to fully comprehend the issue at stake, and to make relevant comments (Coates, 2012). By enhancing communication skills, one is able to speak clearly because by listening to others speak; he also learns to speak with clarity. Learning to speak clearly comes with many benefits, for example: improves relationships with the other members of the group, writing appropriately, persuading and negotiate effectively, and finally making logical summaries in report writing (Chong, 2009). A potential employee possessing communication skills stands to gain considerable mileage in regard to employability as he/she is expected to be able to communicate with colleagues, public in general, managers, employers and clients too.

Teamwork Skills. Trower (2012) describes teamwork skills as the capacity of being an effective group member; further, he gives the essentials for teamwork as: listening to each other, persuading, respecting, sharing, participating, helping and posing questions where necessary to the other members. According to Burnham, Schiro and Fleming (2011), teamwork skills have been fronted also as one of topmost employability skills; the skills entails being able to work effectively especially people from different gender, age, religion and political affiliation

(Ende, 2010). It also carries the idea of being a dependable member of the team whereby people can count on you. To perfect our team-skills, one must learn to contribute positively to the team activities while fulfilling their roles (Carruthers, 1993). Finally, teamwork is foundational in assisting someone to demonstrate leadership (Chong, 2009).

Problem Solving Skills. Allen Consulting Group (2006) informs us that problem solving is an unending process of looking to solutions; a person possessing the skill is a valuable asset to any organization. For that matter, diverse employers cite problem solving skills as one of the employability skills in high demand in the job market. Haggard, Dougherty, Turban and Wilbanks (2011) insist that the mentees should develop their creative and innovative capacities when dealing with complex problems common at the workplace. Finally, with an analytical mind one is able to reflect on the viability of the suggested solutions (Yun & Sorcinelli, 2011).

Initiative and Enterprise Skills. Being enterprising refers to the employee's ability to be innovative, creative and risk taking in order to turn ideas in to action (Karukstis, Gourley, Rossi & Wright, 2010). When applied in the job situation; such skills enhance employee's self-starting initiatives, self-confident, sense to believe in self, strong sense of independence, goal oriented, and ambition to be self-employed. According to Griffin and Reddick (2011), entrepreneurial skills are critical in enabling the mentee to widen his horizon and see opportunities invisible to others, and take risk to pursue them by developing strategic goals and consequently actions. Flexman and Gelb (2011), add that by using entrepreneurial skills, the mentees are able to network with other relevant stakeholders to enhance achieving of goals. The employer knows that a potential employee possessing initiative and entrepreneurial skills is unstoppable by simple barriers (Ende, 2010).

Planning and Organizational Skills. Planning and organizational skills are better described than defined; it is about the ability of developing plans, prioritizing, organizing and managing resources with an aim of attaining the best results. The employee should also be able to pay attention to details before making decisions (Burnham, Schiro and Fleming, 2011). According to Lottero-Perdue & Fifield, (2010) organizing and planning are viewed by employers as essential for the long-term focusing. The capacities to plan and organize are important skills that benchmark core functioning of management and leadership capacities (Feldman et al., 2012). As Trower, (2012) and (Toress & Hernazade, 2010) argue, a person possessing planning and organizing skills is a valued asset, and will most definitely catch the eyes of any potential employer.

Technology Skills. Our world is technology driven, thus when one possesses technological skills it is seen as a great advantage to the employees. Indeed, Information Technology (IT) has become number one cutting edge technology worldwide. It is unimaginable how a person can fit it today's world without IT skills (Toress & Hernazade, 2010). IT has been correctly described as the mother of all success in any organization today; it improves communication; enhances organizational connectivity, and is an astounding tool for organizing and storing

data. Thus possession of IT enhances individuals' employability (Fieldman, 2010).

Self-Management Skills. Allen (2006) defined self-management skills as the personal application of behaviour change strategies meant to produce the desired change in one's behaviour. Skills like self-control and self-monitoring are good examples. As Bissell (2009) correctly observes, these skills promote the desire in the employee to want to produce more for the profitability of the organization. Workers with self-management skills tend to interact well with the other workers at all levels, they are good at decision making. They possess good analytical skills whereby they reduce complex tasks to simple ones (Flexman & Gelb, 2011). Contributing to the same discussion, Nason (2016) adds that a person who has self-management skills has a clear personal vision, and is goal oriented; good in communication, time management, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Thus the employee with self-management skills is a real asset to the employer because of his/her ability to put in place personal vision and goals when evaluating his/her self performance. Individuals with self-management skills work without any supervision, the quality goals they set for themselves become the compass, fuel and roadmap for their success (Toress & Hernazade, 2010).

Transferrable Employability Skills

Haggard, Dougherty, Turban and Wilbanks, (2011) correctly explained transferrable employability skills as the skills and abilities that are relevant and helpful across different areas of life. These skills are developed socially, professionally and at school but are later transferrable to the workplace context. The transferrable skills are also referred to as generic skills. Examples are like scholarship, lifelong learning and global citizens (Rychen & Salganik, 2001; ACCI, 2002).

Toress and Hermazade (2010) point out that scholarship skills enhance the promotion of scholarly attitude in knowledge generation, for example, using research to generate credible knowledge. In the future the research skills can be used to collect data that may be applied in solving problems in the job context. However, to be able to benefit from knowledge generated from research requires other skills that go with research like critical thinking, synthesis and effective presentations of the knowledge generation (Rychen & Salganik, 2001; Hossler, 1984).

Practical Use of CV to Present Cutting Edge Skills

For the employer to notice the employability skills of an applicant, it depends on how the curriculum vitae (CV) are presented. Therefore, efforts should be put in place to try to catch the eyes of the employer (Curtin University, 2011). One of the ground rules as shown by Bissell (2009) is to match one's skills with the employer's requirements. The students should be diligent in compiling a complete list of the job skills they have developed overtime; for example, research experience, projects, assignments, field tours, job placements and any form of volunteer work. Without exercising due care in compiling the CV; such a critical experience may end up going to waste (Yun & Sorcinelli, 2011).

Conclusion

Beyond the degree qualifications, employers expect the graduates seeking for jobs to possess critical employability skills which include: teamwork, problem solving, work ethic, integrity, problem solving, positive attitudes and critical thinking as part of the desired employability skills. Mentoring is important in the development of the relevant employability skills. For success, all the relevant stakeholders like the relevant ministry, universities, mentors, employer and the students must work together for better results. The students also have a phenomenal role to play, since they need to know what they want, keep record of all the employability skills acquired, and the relevant gaps which they may fill with mentors. Mentoring then is one of the most effective approaches for developing the needed skills and competencies.

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